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JAMES R. THOMPSON CENTER SALE PROMPTS NEW CALLS FOR PRESERVATION AND REUSE

Nominated to World Monuments Watch List and the National Register of Historic Places

CHICAGO, May 11, 2021 – Following the tragic and untimely passing of world-renowned Architect Helmut Jahn on May 8, advocates for his iconic James R. Thompson Center in Chicago see a renewed urgency to protect and reuse Jahn’s Postmodern landmark at 100 West Randolph Street.

The State of Illinois has officially listed for sale the Thompson Center, built in 1985. Environmental, historical, cultural, and architectural advocates want to boost the incentives to repurpose the Thompson Center rather than seeing another piece of Chicago history demolished.

The coalition partners nominated the site to the prestigious World Monuments Watch List on May 1 to bring the Thompson Center and its potential threats to international attention.

“The nomination of the Thompson Center to the World Monuments Watch list is a promising and exciting moment for the future of Chicago’s most impressive Postmodern building, said Max Chavez, Director of Research and Special Projects at Preservation Chicago. “If selected for inclusion, the Thompson Center would be internationally honored for its architectural and historic significance, opening the door for necessary conversations about how we can smartly preserve and reuse important Postmodern architecture worldwide.”

“The Thompson Center in Chicago’s Loop is an iconic masterpiece of Postmodern architecture, by world-renowned architect Helmut Jahn,” said Ward Miller, Executive Director of Preservation Chicago. “The loss of this very public building and work of art and architecture would be an embarrassment for a city which prides itself on its architectural legacy.”

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Further making the case for this architecturally and historically significant site, a nomination to list the Thompson Center on the National Register of Historic Places was submitted in April 2021. The nomination, commissioned by Landmarks Illinois and undertaken by Chicago-based consultants Preservation Futures, was funded in part by a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation. It is now under review by the Illinois State Historic Preservation Office which first determined the Thompson Center to be eligible for inclusion on the National Register in 2009.

“The James R. Thompson Center is a nationally significant example of Postmodern architecture and its design of an open and transparent government, referencing earlier examples of a grand public space make it exceptional, said Liz Waytkus, Executive Director of Docomomo US. “We see projects like this play out time and time again where a project is threatened with demolition from a lack of vision, understanding and the perception of being outdated. The James R. Thompson Center is an asset and an architectural icon in the city of Chicago. It can and should be celebrated and restored.”

If the Thompson Center is successfully listed on the National Register, it would make the site’s new owners eligible to apply for federal and state historic tax credits, substantial financing resources for historic building developers. It would also become the first Postmodern building in Chicago and Illinois listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Preservation Chicago brought attention to the threats facing the Thompson Center, including it on its Chicago 7 Most Endangered list yearly from 2016 to 2020. On May 5, Landmarks Illinois also announced it included the Thompson Center on its 2021 Most Endangered Historic Endangered Places in Illinois, its fourth such inclusion since 2017 on its statewide endangered list. The National Trust for Historic Preservation named the Thompson Center as one of America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places in 2019.

“The Thompson Center is worth preserving for its significant design and far more,” said Bonnie McDonald, President & CEO of Landmarks Illinois. “Reuse is the right thing to do environmentally, economically and logistically, as said during our 2021 Most Endangered public announcement on May 5, Landmarks Illinois is ready to help prospective buyers conceptualize reuse scenarios for the irreplaceable building.”

A coalition of local, state, and national professionals has banded together to amplify the importance of the Thompson Center and line up support for its preservation and reuse. The coalition includes:

- AIA Chicago
- AIA Chicago Committee on the Environment
- DOCOMOMO Chicago
- DOCOMOMO US
- Landmarks Illinois
- The National Trust for Historic Preservation
- Preservation Chicago
- Preservation Futures

- more -

The State's request for buyer proposals notes that the Thompson Center is not listed on the National Register, ignoring its 2009 determination of eligibility from the Illinois State Historic Preservation Office. The State's request also informs potentially interested parties that the building was not listed in the Chicago Historic Resources Survey. However, that survey only includes buildings built prior to 1940. Therefore, the Thompson Center's absence does not signify a lack of historical or architectural importance.

Helmut Jahn died on May 8, 2021, when the bicycle he was riding was struck by two cars in the western suburbs of Chicago. He was born in Germany in 1940, and he came to Chicago in 1966 to spend one year. That turned into an over-50-year relationship with Chicago while still carrying on his architectural legacy around the world. His unexpected death leaves the future of his 1985 James R. Thompson Center even more uncertain. Jahn himself was an outspoken advocate for the reuse and adaptation of the State of Illinois Building into a new and vibrant use.

Preservation Chicago launched a Change.org petition (change.org/SaveTheThompsonCenter) on May 3 in support of keeping this important building a part of Chicago's historic built and cultural environment. To date, 768 signatures have been collected.